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# 13th: The Horror Story That Is America's Past and Present

Suzy Houser

Macalester College, [shouser@macalester.edu](mailto:shouser@macalester.edu)

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# 13TH: THE HORROR STORY THAT IS AMERICA'S PAST AND PRESENT

Suzy Houser

Often provoking discomfort and even disgust, *13th*, written, directed and produced by Ava DuVernay, shines a sharp spotlight on the silenced history of the United States. The striking film reveals how deliberate and relentless Reconstruction Era discrimination extends to modern United States' political and social systems. Right now, as our country direly needs a stern telling of our own history, DuVernay offers the world a chance to powerfully reflect on the current state of our nation's race relations. *13th* is available on Netflix; educating oneself is not only urgent but unavoidable. The American people must hear activists, politicians, and historians recount the frightening truth.

Watching *13th* feels like witnessing a carefully executed unveiling of our nation's worst secrets. Over and over, historical footage shifts from illustrating the pained faces of Black Americans being arrested and harassed to genial Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan speaking on race. These contrasting scenes produce an uncomfortable frustration; do these presidents truly not possess any empathy for the very people they are repressing?

Tangible historical footage is particularly captivating for younger viewers who may not understand the reality of these events, but other visuals create emotional connections and invoke strong impressions as well. Throughout the film, as each presidential era proceeds, the prison population is shown in bold, white numbers set against a black background. The simple combination of colors creates a stark and candid visual of the increasingly unsettling issue. Each time this visual is used, the number grows faster, pointedly illustrating the incarceration rate's exponential growth after Nixon invented the War on Drugs.

Equally provoking and expressive are the animations used throughout the film. The stripes of the American flag morph into rows and rows of prisoners. Hundreds of black dots rapidly flee the South to Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. As one interviewee, Corey Greene, explains, Black Americans in the early 20th century were refugees fleeing oppression. In these moments, knowledgeable and expressive interviewees

facilitate the audience's realizations about their own country. *13th* takes obscure information and portrays it in an accessible manner, inspiring the average American to realize the gravity of the issue and act.

The dramatic music and snowballing velocity of the story contribute to the feeling that the film is a horror story come to life. As the pounding beat of the music becomes increasingly loud and fast, the story too becomes increasingly intense and horrific. Finally, as the speed and intensity of the film climax, the music drops to a faint, eerily peaceful melody, which contrasts with heartbreaking images of people of color being harassed by Trump supporters. The audience hears Trump's voice ring loud, encouraging violence and discrimination.

*13th* proves that this history is anything but revelation; discrimination against Black Americans has been glaring under our noses for centuries. *13th* is essential for every American to watch precisely because many people are completely unaware of the blatant systematic processes inhibiting Black Americans. It successfully convinces viewers that these issues are long-standing, relevant now in the 21st century, and important; something must be done about the seemingly unreal and distant horrors that persist today. Thus, DuVernay successfully publicizes the terrifying cruelty of our past and our present while simultaneously providing tangible hope for the future of our nation.